

XIX.—*On the East-Asiatic Shore-Lark* (*Otocorys longirostris*). By HENRY SEEBOHM.

Otocoris longirostris, Gould, fide Moore, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1855, p. 215 (India).

Otocorys penicillata, Gould, apud Swinhoe, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1862, p. 318 (China).

Otocorys alpestris, Linn. apud Swinhoe, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1863, p. 272 (China).

Otocoris albigula, Brandt, apud Dybowski, Journ. Orn. 1868, p. 334 (Dauria).

Otocorys sibirica, Eversmann, fide Swinhoe, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1871, p. 390 (China).

Otocoris elwesii, Blanford, Journ. As. Soc. Beng. 1872, p. 62 (Himalayas).

Otocorys alpestris, Linn. apud Dresser, B. Eur. iv. p. 392 (1874) (China).

Otocorys penicillata, Gould, apud Dresser, B. Eur. iv. p. 397 (1874) (India).

Otocorys brandti, Dresser, B. Eur. iv. p. 401 (1874) (Kirghis steppes).

Otocorys parvexi, Taczan. Bull. Soc. Zool. France, 1876, p. 161 (Dauria).

Otocoris nigrifrons, Przevalski, Mongolia and Thibet, ii. p. 103 (1876) (Mongolia).

Otocorys sibirica, Swinh., David & Oust. Ois. de la Chine, p. 316 (1876) (China).

Habitat. A resident in Turkestan, the Himalayas, the Altai Mountains, Dauria, and Mongolia, occasionally wandering in winter into North China*, North India, and South-east Russia.

The evolution of order out of chaos has the same charms for the ornithologist that the putting together of a puzzle has for a schoolboy. As an example of chaos let us take the

* A specimen in Canon Tristram's possession, said to be from Pekin, and once in the Swinhoe collection, is a winter example (shot 12th Dec. 1863) of *O. alpestris*. David and Oustalet give the range of the two species very correctly.

portions of the articles on the Shore-Larks in Dresser's 'Birds of Europe' referring to the species the name of which heads the present article. To this the same author has added an appropriate climax in his letter on the subject (Ibis, 1884, p. 116). As an example of order, I venture to refer to the synonymy and geographical distribution copied at the head of this article from my 'History of British Birds,' ii. p. 286*. I must do Mr. Dresser the justice to say that in the letter already mentioned he admits his error (long ago pointed out by Blanford and Scully) in uniting *O. longirostris* with *O. penicillata*; but in doing so he appears to imply that the rest of his work was free from important blunders, and does not deserve the mild censure which I applied to it. He has apparently forgotten that in the 'Birds of Europe' (iv. p. 396) he says that *O. penicillata* "extends eastwards into North China," and contradicts himself on page 397, where he says that an example in the Swinhoe collection from Tientsin is a long-billed form of *O. brandti*, a statement which is quite correct. But on page 392 he had referred the very same skin to *O. alpestris*. Which of the three species does he really think it belongs to? His treatment of *O. elwesi* is equally capricious. On page 395 he identifies it with *O. penicillata*; but on page 401 he refers it to *O. alpestris*. Unfortunately both these identifications are wrong. *O. elwesi* is unquestionably a somewhat small form of *O. longirostris*. Of his blunder respecting the latter species little need be said, as he has recanted it; but his statement on page 401 that the series of Shore-Larks in the Gould collection from Kulu (one of which is the type of *O. longirostris*) all show the black on the breast united with that on the neck is utterly inexplicable. The fact is that not one of them does so, as any one may now see in the British-Museum collection; neither does the example depicted in the P. Z. S. by no less an artist than Wolf. We now come to the most "egregious blunder" of all. On page 397 Dresser

* I have added to the synonymy the catalogue of Swinhoe's and Dresser's blunders, which I purposely omitted in my book, not wishing to call special attention to their number and importance.

comes to the conclusion that the pale southern ally of *O. alpestris* with the white throat has not got a name, and proposes for it that of *O. brandti*. On page 398 he gives its geographical distribution as "probably restricted to the steppes of Southern Russia." Nevertheless it is a most remarkable fact that Dresser's 'Birds of Europe' does not contain an article on a bird named by Dresser himself and supposed by him to be confined to Europe. As a matter of fact, the type appears to be a Sarepta skin, and there is also a skin from Astrakan in the British Museum; but the latter has only recently been added to the national collection*.

I doubt if a more puzzling bit of ornithological chaos than this could be found anywhere. It took me a week's hard work to unravel it; but by a careful measurement and comparison of all the skins in my own collection and in that of the British Museum, I came to the conclusion that *O. longirostris* was a pale subtropical ally or representative of *O. alpestris*, which ranges across Central Asia from the basin of the Caspian to Mongolia, extending northwards through the Altai Mountains to Dauria, and southwards into the Himalayas. *O. alpestris* is a bird of the tundra, whilst *O. longirostris* is a bird of the steppes, and breeds from one to two thousand miles south of its arctic ally. The differences in size in the latter species at first puzzled me, but by comparing measurements of skins from different localities I came to the conclusion, to which I still adhere, that *O. brandti* and *O. longirostris* cannot be separated; they are, in fact, united by *O. elwesi*†, as Dresser might possibly have observed

* Finsch, in his account of the Shore-Larks found by him in South-west Siberia, states positively that the black on the breast joins that on the cheeks; but in two examples from his collection, now in the British Museum, this is not the case. He probably got both species, as Severtzow also obtained both in North-west Turkestan.

† Severtzow at first separated *O. brandti* of North-west Turkestan from *O. longirostris* of East Turkestan (Ibis, 1876, p. 181); but later he apparently united them, for in his "Birds of the Pamir" (Ibis, 1883, p. 61) he speaks only of *O. elwesi*, adding that "in the Pamir a subspecies with a rather long beak predominates, but this difference is neither considerable nor constant."

if he had taken the trouble to examine the material which has "come to light" since he wrote his articles in the 'Birds of Europe.' It seems to me that when the facts respecting them are known, no "unbiassed ornithologist" can doubt that these three forms all belong to one species. All three forms occur both in Turkestan and in the Himalayas, and are connected together by a series of intermediate forms, so that the division into two or three is a perfectly arbitrary one. I have only been able to get the measurements of three Mongolian skins; but as one of these is of the small form, one somewhat larger, and the third of the large form, there cannot be much doubt that the variation in Mongolian forms is the same. Precisely the same variation of size, both of wings and bill, occurs in *O. penicillata*, so that if there are two or three species of Eastern Asiatic Shore-Larks, there must also be the same of Western Asiatic Shore-Larks. The amount of black at the base of the upper mandible varies also irrespective of locality, and the variation is also found to nearly the same extent in *O. penicillata*. The width of the white band which separates the black of the neck from the black of the breast seems to depend entirely on the make up of the skin. If the neck is stretched it looks broad, but if it is made up short it of course looks narrow. Winter skins show more white on the neck and forehead, because at that season many of the black feathers have pale tips, which are cast in spring. None of the characters pointed out appear to me to be of the slightest specific, or even subspecific, value, because they are not confined to birds from any one locality, nor are they confined to one species only, but appear to be individual variations common to the genus. Dresser appears to be shocked at a difference of .8 inch in the length of wing in one species, though he admits a similar difference in his skins of *O. penicillata*, and both he and I agree to a variation of a whole inch in the length of wing of the Common Sky-Lark. Difference of size, where it is co-existent with difference of geographical distribution, may warrant subspecific distinction; but where nature has not drawn a geographical distinction most ornithologists are con-

tent to allow difference of size to be regarded as an individual peculiarity.

The Common or Arctic Shore-Lark is a circumpolar bird, being found on the arctic prairies of America, as well as on the fields of Lapland and the tundra of Siberia. Two other species or subspecies of Shore-Larks occur in the American continent; but I have not been able to see a large enough series to speak positively concerning them. So far as I am able to judge, Dresser's treatment of the American Shore-Larks is quite as careless as his work on the Asiatic species of this group. He represents *O. alpestris* as breeding throughout North America, the only other American species in his opinion being *O. peregrina* from Bogota. Both these statements appear to me to be entirely wrong, and contrary to the evidence so carefully collected by Messrs. Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway. It appears to me that, in addition to *O. alpestris*, which breeds in the arctic regions of both continents, probably never below the limits of forest-growth, there is on the American continent a southern form, *O. occidentalis*, breeding on the plains of the upper valley of the Mississippi and the valley of the Missouri, which, like *O. longirostris*, has the throat white instead of yellow. The alleged intermediate forms between it and its southern ally I imagine to be either birds of the year of the southern species or faded summer examples of the northern species. In what respect *O. occidentalis* differs from *O. longirostris* I am unable to say. The third American species is *O. chrysolæma* (of which *O. peregrina* is doubtless a synonym). This bird is a tropical form of *O. alpestris*, and is a resident in Mexico and some of the adjoining United States, its range extending southwards into the extreme north-west of South America. It is said to differ from its arctic ally in being smaller and richer in colour, the yellow on the throat being even more brilliant than in the arctic species.